
Prince William Working Group Tackles Domestic Violence

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The Community Criminal Justice Board is a body made up of the heads of criminal justice agencies in the Prince William, Virginia, area that held a public hearing on the topic of domestic violence in October 1998. Presenting agencies included local police departments, the local domestic violence agency, the juvenile court, the office of the Commonwealth's attorney, and the local community corrections agency. Although the police response to domestic violence in the Prince William area is among the best in Virginia, findings from this public hearing demonstrated a clear need for collaboration among the various agencies dealing with domestic violence issues.

In response to the public hearing, the Community Criminal Justice Board appointed a subcommittee chaired by the chief magistrate and including three police chiefs, the sheriff, and a chief judge. The local community corrections agency, as well as other domestic violence service providers, also participated in the subcommittee meeting that took place in November 1998.

This subcommittee recommended the establishment of a Greater Prince William Domestic Violence Prevention Council, to be made up of all agencies with an interest in domestic violence. The goals of the council would be to establish domestic violence protocols and make recommendations on improving the community's response to domestic violence. The local community corrections agency and the local domestic violence program volunteered to lead the initiative.

Creating the Council

The exploration began in 1998. Setting up an effective body to address domestic violence issues was not an easy feat. For many months, the subcommittee investigated models in other states and endured some frustrating times as they laid the foundation for the evolution of an organized and effective domestic violence council.

Profile: Greater Prince William Domestic Violence Prevention Council, Prince William County, Virginia

Partner agencies:

- Local police
- The courts
- Community corrections
- A rape crisis center
- Domestic violence program
- Social services
- Child protective services
- The victim/witness unit
- The office of the Commonwealth's attorney

Purpose:

To identify and address gaps in domestic violence services at all levels.

Launched: 2000

The Greater Prince William Domestic Violence Prevention Council was formally established in 2000 and now meets every month to discuss ways to improve the community's response to domestic violence. The goal of the council is to identify and address gaps in domestic violence services at all levels. Council meetings are open to all criminal justice professionals and service providers who have contact with either the victims or perpetrators of domestic violence. Regular attendees include representatives from the police departments, the courts, community corrections, a rape crisis center, the local domestic violence program, social services, child protective services, the victim/witness unit, and the office of the Commonwealth's attorney.

The Council's Achievements to Date

Although implementing the domestic violence council was difficult, an effective working group now exists. Major achievements include:

- ◆ Ensuring that protective orders are being entered into VCIN (Virginia Crime Information Network). A significant percentage (30% or more) of protective orders had been getting lost between agencies. These orders were therefore not being entered into VCIN, or not being entered until weeks after they were issued.
- ◆ Ensuring that the respondent's compliance is monitored, including special conditions of the protective order.
- ◆ Ensuring the availability of domestic violence resources in Spanish, including court-related paperwork (still a work in progress).
- ◆ Ensuring the presence of an effective outreach program that creates awareness of the serious and widespread effect domestic violence has on the community.
- ◆ Ensuring the inclusion of civil protective order issues by probation officers supervising domestic violence offenders.
- ◆ Ensuring the targeting of repeat offenders for felony convictions.

Accomplishments in regard to education, communications, and support-building include:

- ◆ Establishing a Speakers Bureau that provides presentations, on request, to the community on issues relating to domestic violence.
- ◆ Sponsoring quarterly domestic violence public education sessions that are open to professionals and the public. A different agency hosts each session, selecting a topic for discussion and organizing the workshop.

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- ◆ Creating a steering committee to meet monthly, develop agendas, and ensure that all essential participants attend meetings and participate in resolving issues.

The Work Continues

Over the past year, the council has made significant headway in becoming an effective and responsive body. The council is determined to make progress in the following areas during the upcoming year:

- ◆ Dealing more effectively with repeat abusers.
- ◆ Bringing victim intervention services into the court process earlier.
- ◆ Examining the relationship between child protective services and spousal domestic violence.
- ◆ Considering the connections between substance abuse, sexual abuse, and domestic violence.
- ◆ Giving consideration to becoming a 501(c) organization in order to raise funds and advance the goal of achieving an effective community response to domestic violence.

Although much work remains to be done, the Domestic Violence Council of the Prince William County, Virginia, area is a fine example of how the private sector, the police, community corrections, and the court system can work together to make the community safer. ■

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